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Abstract

Inspired by state theory and in particular Nicos Poulantzas, this article claims that spatial planning should be seen neither as autonomous (subject) nor merely an expression of something else (thing), but rather grasped as a place for condensation of social relations. The notion of dialectics is used in order to grasp relations between planning and other aspects and social relations. From this, we can outline five theses, claiming that planning (1) is constituted by conflicts which are grounded in social relations, (2) is never a neutral place, (3) contains neither a ‘dark’ nor a ‘bright’ side, (4) and is changing and being changed by the world and also that (5) political alliances should be made between planners and non-planners who want the world to change in similar directions.

Keywords

advocacy planning, dialectics, Lefebvre, planning theory, Poulantzas, social relations, spatial planning, state theory

Introduction

Apparently, since the 2007/2008 crisis, we have seen a new role of the state. It is not only back on stage but has undoubtedly also taken a lead role. It has also become obvious that the capitalist market economy was not – and can never be – a self-regulating process. This has led to an increasing focus on the state within academia, with claims of the so-called ‘return’ of the state, but profounder analysis claims that ideas such as the state had withdrawn from the economy was a ‘neoliberal ideological myth’ (see Jessop, 2010; Panitch and Gindin, 2010; Perez, 2010). The call for the ‘return of planning’ as a necessary step for dealing with the ecological crisis (Giddens, 2011) strikes similar chords.

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How will the field of planning theory cope with this? As planning is often considered to be an 'act of good will', questions arise as to whether an increased interest in planning a priori is a development for the better. This article argues this is not the case, as planning should not be conceptualised as 'good' in the first place. Planning theory has traditionally emphasised the normative takes on what planners should do over rigid analytical takes on what planning is all about (Beauregard, 2005; Flyvbjerg, 1996). According to Porter (2011), planning scholarship is far too focused on institutional design, stakeholder consensus, process-based analyses or, as she formulates it, 'the latest French philosopher to "bring" to planning' (p. 478), but has little to say about critical issues like deeper wealth polarisation, more displacement, higher profiteering through land development and greater environmental impact. I second Porter that this should be a task for planning scholarship, and to do so, we need thorough investigations of 'what planning is all about' and to place planning within its social context, that is, reflecting upon relations between spatial planning and the world (where Porter's 'critical issues' exist). Any kind of 'return to planning' might leave us groping in the dark unless we know as precisely as possible what we are talking about.

Planning will in this article be comprehended as spatial planning, that is, the complex processes of regulating land use that (often) ends with a decision as to where (not) to place what. The aim here is not to formulate a coherent and final definition of the state or spatial planning, but rather to articulate a framework that enables discussing the place of planning in the world and to articulate conclusions that can have practical implications on planning. This task is impeded by the fact that land-use regulations differ in space and time.¹ Even within the relative homogenous Nordic countries, planning authorities are nested in different departments and levels of the state (Nordregio, 2004), and private firms contribute to various degrees and ways in planning processes. Withstanding such differences, in Western Europe, the final decision on land use is ultimately within the organisational structures of the bourgeois state. As land-use regulation is ultimately a part of the state, state theory can also tell us something about spatial planning. Therefore, we simply cannot understand spatial planning outside its relation to the state. Reflecting upon state theory when researching planning is both necessary due to the legal and organisational relationships, but will also serve as an inspiration beyond that, as it can offer a new vista on planning.

The Greek Marxist and political/state theorists Nicos Poulantzas (1976, 2000) claims that the state should not be conceptualised as a *thing* or a *subject*, but rather a *condensation of social relations*. This article argues for a likewise approach to spatial planning: the planning authority is neither autonomous (a subject) nor merely an expression of something else (a thing). This implies not only a focus on what planners *do*, but also an increased interest in what planning *is*, as well as a thorough investigation of the *context* planning finds itself within. Relations between planning and extra-planning spheres and structures will be investigated through the notion of *dialectics*, as derived from Ollman, Harvey, Lefebvre and others.

The article proceeds in three sections. The first outlines the context through a brief discussion on relevant aspects of planning theory. The second presents a theoretical approach to state theory mainly inspired by Poulantzas, and also Lefebvre, Jessop and others. The section also introduces the notion of dialectics. The third section articulates

the argument that planning should be grasped as ‘condensation of social relations’, and based on this, the article articulates five theses on spatial planning: (1) planning is constituted by conflicts which are grounded in social relations, (2) planning is never a neutral place, (3) there is neither a bright side nor a dark side of planning, or any combinations of these, (4) the world changes planning and planning changes the world and (5) political alliances should be made between planners and non-planners who want the world to change in similar directions. The article ends with an elaborated debate on the fifth thesis, which is also discussed in relation to the tradition of advocacy planning.

Planning and the world, in the world of planning theory

It is well known that the field of planning has been troubled by the fact that it is both an academic discipline and an actual profession/activity. This fact, which forces us to be humble in terms of epistemology, is also what makes the field so incredibly fascinating. According to Beauregard (2005), planning theory has always been less about what planners do than about how they should do it, as it elevates exhortation over explanation. Flyvbjerg (1996) argues similarly that planning theory is more about ‘what should be done’ than ‘what is actually done’ (p. 393). Coming from another angle, Healey (2000) argues that planning theory should and must be both normative and analytic. I second Healey, it *should*. But I would also argue that there is a consistent problem in planning theory concerning its poor analysis of how the world is put together (cf. Porter, 2011) – as well as of how planning departments are parts of that world, hence the need for emphasising analysis on how planning relates to social relations. Those taking shortcuts here might, to paraphrase Flyvbjerg (1996), ‘know where they would like to go but not how to get there’ (p. 384) – or where they stand, one could add. The absence of a relatively firm definition of planning, Yiftachel (2001) argues, has led to that the search to explain and improve planning has ‘often been akin to shooting in the dark’ (p. 3).

As planning is a field of study that potentially concerns views on space, state, economy and so on, it should come as no surprise that there are huge variations between its canons. Some variations derive from different theoretical and political positions, others from working on different level of abstraction. For instance, the works of Patsy Healey and Henri Lefebvre offer remarkably different positions on the role of planning. While Healey (2010) sees the ‘planning project’, developed in 20th-century Europe, as the ‘project of improving place qualities [that] moved from the advocacy and experimental of activists into a significant activity of formal government’ (p. 9–10), Lefebvre (1976) claims that ‘urban planning’ is the worst enemy of the urban; it is ‘capitalism’s and the state’s strategic instrument for the manipulation of fragmented urban reality and the production of controlled space’ (p. 15). There are also differences due to levels of abstraction; the analyses of two disparate authors as Harvey (1985) and Gunder (2010) are both conducted on such levels of abstraction that they would be difficult to convert into planning practice. On the contrary, much empirically driven research leaves theoretical debates external to the argument – if included at all.

There are also differences between discourses in planning theory and many major discourses in urban studies and human geography. Although there are many brilliant works on how the city, space, urbanism and also planning relate to the world (see, for

example, Edwards, 1995; Hague, 1991; Harvey, 1985; Lefebvre, 1991), translations into planning theory have often been ambiguous. Reasons might be manifold, but, again, levels of abstractions, differing fields of study and different theoretical standpoints might all be parts of the picture. The usage of the work of Lefebvre in planning theory, for example, with a substantial impact on the discipline, contains some (great) analyses on the social/historical context and ‘space’, but these become less clear when related to planning (see Buser, 2012; Carp, 2004; Leary, 2009; with Healey 2007 arguably being an exception). One consequence for planning theory has been that the nexus between social relations and planning, as well as between planning and the rest of the state, has not been sufficiently investigated and conceptualised (Porter, 2011; Yiftachel et al., 2001).

The rise of communicative planning theory (CPT) in the 1990s was early on criticised for lacking attention to the power relations in which planning is situated (see, for example, McGuirk, 2001). In effect, there have been serious attempts to deal with relations of power within CPT (Forester, 1989; Healey, 1999, 2003). And in one sense, it is tempting to claim that there is nothing wrong with CPT – it is rather the world that is erroneous. It is not the idea of an egalitarian speech situation, but a reality of immense power differences, that is the actual problem. But as theories and practices must be investigated dialectically, the theory also fails. And this is the focal point: the problem is not merely lacking attention to ‘power’ but rather a poor understanding as to how planning is dialectically intertwined with social relations. This is why the proposed marriage between ‘ideal speech situation’ derived from Habermasian communicative ethics and real economic forces and power relations never became happy (see also Beauregard, 2005; Fainstein, 2000; Holgersen and Haarstad, 2009; McGuirk, 2001), and arguably one of the reasons why the well-meaning theory of communicative planning has transformed from an interesting ideal, to obscuring and facilitating the dominant ideology of contemporary market forces, that is, neoliberalism (cf. Gunder, 2010).

Among approaches that do emphasise precisely the relation between planning and extra-planning processes, we find Baeten’s (2012) *neoliberal planning* and Alexander’s (2005) linking of planning with *institutional transformation*. Both approaches take the nexus between planning and the world seriously, which is very much appreciated. However, both concepts are in danger of becoming very broad and might therefore be difficult to define and operationalise (see also Alexander, 2005; Karlsen et al., 2011; Tasan-Kok and Baeten, 2012). There is also an implicit normative assumption in both that planners, despite the cruelty in the world they operate within, are ‘doing good’.

When planning (theory) feels good

According to Beauregard (2005), the turn to institutional transformation is to a great extent related to an enduring complaint that planners, *as they attempt to do good*, are opposed by the ‘political arena, people’s selfishness, market-based greed, and bureaucratic ineptitude’ (p. 204). This has strong similarities to the discourse on neoliberal planning, where emphasis is on the cohabitation between neoliberalism, in its various forms, and planning – the latter defined as ‘some kind of state intervention for the betterment of our built and natural environment’ (Baeten, 2012: 205).

The idea that planners initially are ‘doing good’ is well established in planning theory, from Peter Hall (1996) where the idea of planning essentially represents a ‘reaction to the evils of the nineteenth-century city’ (p. 7) to Patsy Healey’s (2010) ‘planning project’ (see also Amdam and Amdam, 2000; Forester, 1989). The frequent failures and mistakes in planning are mainly related to ‘external’ political and economic forces, if not to technical difficulties (Yiftachel, 2001). This optimistic and normative attitude can also be read as a reaction to Marxian approaches of the 1970s, as Harvey and Lefebvre, among others, that often connoted planning as instrumental for capital accumulation. The doing-good thesis became problematised within planning theory in the 1990s with the notion of ‘dark side of planning’, emphasising that the same policy tools and capabilities used for social reform (i.e. ‘good’) could also be used to advance opposing goals (Flyvbjerg, 1996; Yiftachel, 1998; Yiftachel et al., 2001). Yiftachel (2001) suggests a reading of urban and regional planning as a ‘double-edge sword’ – with one side being of social control and suppression and the other the benevolent state.² But only sentences after introducing the metaphor, Yiftachel (2001) criticises it due to the fact that ‘in reality, of course, the consequences of planning fall in between the various poles identified [...], as policies and practices meet the complex and layered reality of late-modern societies’ (p. 11). This complex and layered reality should be the starting point for investigations, and in order to make sense of this reality, we need to pay careful attention to the social relations at play.

In search of social relations in space

When scrutinising the dialectics between urban planning and social relations, we can also find guidance and inspirations in some of the brilliant analyses that have been conducted on dialectics between *space* and social relations, and it goes without saying that Lefebvre is one of the main protagonists here. In *The Production of Space* (1991), he raises the question of how the fact that (social) space is a (social) product can be so effectively concealed. Lefebvre’s answer points to a double illusion, of both transparency and opacity. In the *illusion of transparency*, space appears as ‘luminous, as intelligible, as giving action free rein’ (p. 27), and is related to a view on space as innocent and free of traps and secret places. But this transparent illusion is a trap in itself, as underlying structures are concealed by layers of fetishism (see also Brenner and Elden, 2009). *The realistic illusion* refers to naïve attitude of natural simplicity. Where the illusion of transparency refers to the quasi-magical power of being able to see everything there is to see, the illusion of opacity refers to the belief that the things in space are all there is. But according to Lefebvre, underlying social relations constitute the production process. In the following, I will argue that this approach will also have implications for how we see planning. And to do so, I will make a detour via state theory.

State and social relations

An emphasis on the state in spatial planning immediately leads us into the troubling and difficult discourses as to how to understand the state, and its complexity makes it impossible for any single theory to fully capture or explain the phenomena (Jessop, 2008).

Indeed, even within Marxism alone, there are various ways of comprehending the state. In the 1970s, the British debate was dominated by Miliband's (1970, 1973) empirical focus, the German one by the state derivation debate (Altvater and Hoffmann, 1990; Holloway and Picciotto, 1978b) and the French by Poulantzas' more structural approach (see the following). In addition come various takes inspired by Gramsci, Lefebvre and Foucault (Holloway and Picciotto, 1978a; Jessop, 1990, 2008; Lefebvre, 2009b; Mann, 2008; Panitch, 2002). A common denominator is that they all stress the fact that the state is not an *ahistorical* object of study, but rather a product of history which must be grasped in all its spatial and temporal complexity and as embedded in wider social relations; any theory of the capitalist state should hence also be able to 'elucidate the metamorphoses of its object' (Poulantzas, 2000: 123). Although acknowledging the specific form and functions states might take and the fact that processes can be mediated and engendered by state bodies, in the following, I will stress how these are related to broader social contexts (cf. Jessop, 2008).

This article will use the work of Poulantzas as point of departure, but acknowledges that he did not necessarily managed to solve his own dilemmas (Clarke, 1977; Jessop, 1990). Poulantzas was one of the leading structural Marxists in late 1960s and early 1970s, but died while being in a period of opening new concepts and exploring new ideas, which makes his later works (which are the ones mostly referred to in this article) seem as 'unfinished business' (Hall, 2000: xii).³ This article will therefore use *dialectics* to fill some of the gaps.

Poulantzas (2000) argues that the state cannot be understood by merely referring to, on the one hand, *political domination* – that is, to the 'nature of the bourgeoisie or to the political struggle between the bourgeoisie and the working class' (p. 52), or on the other, to the state's economic functions. Similarly, Poulantzas (1976) claims that the state is normally comprehended as a *subject* or a *thing*:

As a Thing: this refers to the instrumentalist conception of the State, as a passive tool in the hands of a class or fraction, in which case the State is seen as having no autonomy whatever. As Subject: the autonomy of the State, conceived here in terms of its specific power, ends up by being considered as absolute, by being reduced to its 'own will', in the form of the rationalizing instance of civil society (cf. Keynes), and is incarnated in the power of the group that concretely represents this rationality/power (bureaucracy, élites). (p. 74)

This distinction is according to Jessop (2008) represented in everyday language: either we talk about how the state is doing this or that (*subject*), or how economic classes, political parties or someone else is using the state to pursue its interests and projects (*thing*). The alternative, according to Poulantzas, should neither be found in any of the two approaches, nor in the *any combination* of them. The thing/subject distinction is rather a false dilemma that needs to be transcended. Accordingly, Poulantzas (1976, 2000) argued that the state should instead be conceptualised in terms of *social relation*. And more precisely, the state could be conceptualised as a '*specific material condensation* of a relationship of forces among classes and class fractions' (Poulantzas, 2000: 129, original emphasis). The class forces/social relations are not merely reflected in this material condensation – the state also contributes in constituting them (Jessop, 2008).

The relations between the state and other structures, spheres and components in society, are explained by Poulantzas through the concept of ‘*relative autonomy*’. This concept derives from his early writing (i.e. Poulantzas, 1975 [1968]), where he conducted more ‘regional’ studies within the structuralist tradition (Jessop, 1990). Although Poulantzas turns less determinist/orthodox towards the end of his life, he always retained a residual class reductionism (Jessop, 2008), and such residues of earlier thinking also make him always fall back on his well-known concept of *relative autonomy* (Hall and Hunt, 1979). There are different ways of operationalising this concept, and it is argued that it will have different levels, meanings and modalities at different stages of capitalist development and vary from social formation to social formation (Jessop, 1990; Mann, 2008; Thomas, 2002). But this concept is not the best when attempting to grasp state and extra-state relations. The dilemma of subject (autonomy) versus thing (economic determinism) is not solved. This is due, I will argue, to some fundamental problems with the concept of ‘autonomy’ itself. Bob Jessop (1990) argues that

... the economic base is neither exclusive economic in its elements nor absolutely autonomous and so cannot operate as the ‘cause without cause’ which determines other social spheres. The same logic seems to hold for all other possible candidates for being the ultimate determinant of social structuration. (Jessop, 1990: 101)

Just as it is highly problematic to analyse the economy without extra-economic factors, the same goes for the state. As the state cannot operate without ‘extra-state’ processes and spheres, no ‘autonomy’ exists. *Relative autonomy* is still autonomy. The problem is also located within Poulantzas’ own writing: as mentioned, the state should *not* be grasped as a *combination* of thing (no autonomy) or subject (full autonomy), but still, this is exactly what is done in the notion of relative autonomy.

But the baby should not be thrown out with the bath water: what Poulantzas stressed was the relations, mutual interaction and co-evolution of different spheres.⁴ Also in a highly relational approach, Lefebvre (2009b) argues that the state cannot be reduced to any of its institutions, because each one refers back to some other, ‘for example, the university to culture, and the judiciary to various (civil, criminal) codes, in such a way that the State seems ungraspable’ (p. 220).⁵ Similar to Poulantzas, the state for Lefebvre (2009a) is not ‘that which crowns society, realizes it or brings it to completion’, but rather ‘the product of antagonisms, contradictions internal to society’ (p. 84). Constantly insisting on relations, Lefebvre (2009a) claims that

There is a dialectical interaction between the economy, which is to say economic growth, and the development of the political element. It is this dialectical interaction that determines the nature, the internal structure, the role, and above all the weight of the State; the structure of the State therefore depends, in the long run of course, and considered over vast historical periods, on the movement of the conjuncture, which is to say on this interaction. (p. 59)

In order to grasp relations between the ‘condensation of social relations’ and other spheres and structures, I will mobilise the concept of dialectics, on which I elaborate in the following.

Bring in the dialectics

Ollman (2003; see also Lefebvre, 1976) argues for a dialectics that goes beyond the ‘rock-ribbed triad’ of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, and which gives priority, ontologically and epistemologically, to processes, relations, flows and fluxes. Things, systems and structures exist within the processes themselves, and as elements are parts of their mutual relations, changes in relations also become changes in the elements themselves – and vice versa (Ollman 2003). Parts and wholes are mutually constitutive of each other, and changes, in this sense, also become a part of what things are (Harvey, 1996; Merrifield, 1993; Ollman, 1990). Ollman (2003) often uses the concept of *relation* to grasp various phenomena and uses it in two different senses: first, as referring to the factor itself, and second, as relation between different factors. Applied on the state, this would refer to first, the state as constituted by various relations – as outlined above, and second, the relations between the state and other factors (or ‘relations’), for example, the ‘economy’ or ‘class’ – here used as synonym with connections.

Seeing the state as a relation or process that is constantly changing forces us to pay attention to how these ‘flows’ sometimes also crystallise into ‘permanences’ (i.e. something that takes the position of seemingly stability, even though it also is changing). In terms of planning, we expect, for example, the planning legislation to be ‘the same’ from one day to the next – otherwise, it would be hard to even imagine the planning process, as we know it today. But again, institutions exist through the processes and relations they internalise (Harvey, 1996).

The philosophy of ‘internal relations’, which Ollman advocates, has been criticised, for example, with an argument that some relations are so indirect that they can be said effectively to be external, for example, relations between sunspot activity and trade cycles (Wells, 1981). But according to Harvey (1996), there are not any fixed or a priori boundaries to this system, and hence, to setting of boundaries in respect to space, time, scale and environment become a major strategic consideration (i.e. *abstractions* in Ollman’s terminology). Harvey (1996) claims that ‘Where my relevant environment begins and ends is itself a function of the ecological, economic, and other processes which are relevant to me’ (p. 53). Generally, this take on dialectics leaves little room for autonomous spheres, as we know them from structuralism. And in terms of planning, although any development in one sense have implications for the whole planet, it becomes a strategic consideration where to set boundaries (e.g. who to involve/compensate) in any particular planning process.

In discourses on Marxian state theory in the 1960s and 1970s, writers were arguably often thinking class relations when saying social relations (Altwater and Hoffmann, 1990), something that often led to economic reductionism (cf. Jessop, 2008). But no such step towards reductionism is needed. Gender relations and racism are also social structures that obviously should be taken into account from the very start. Or more precisely, dialectical view does not ontologically ‘start’ with any single process and we cannot put any particular social relations *first*, and then drag in the state, space or any other structure or phenomena. Dialectics emphasise instead how for example social relations and spatial planning through the state apparatus constitute each other.

This does not mean that all relations, spheres or processes should be given equal weight. The goal is rather to emphasise the ‘dialectical tension within their uneven development’ (Harvey 2010: 134) or the ‘moments of a contradictory unity’ (Altvater and Hoffmann, 1990). Fainstein (2001) argues that ‘everything may matter, but not equally’ (p. 19), Ollman (2003) argues that ‘one process often has a greater effect on others than they do on it’ (p. 71) and Jessop (1990) argues that the ‘real problem is to assess the relative weight of different institutions and social forces in determining specific outcomes in a complex, changing conjuncture’ (p. 103). The relations between institutions and social forces, between spatial form and social relations, or between various ‘activity spheres’ should be grasped dialectically rather than through causality (Harvey, 2010: 123). Concerning spatial planning this become crucial – as we cannot a priori know what might affect the planning process. Still, as everyone involved in planning knows, it is hard to underestimate the power of capital in contemporary city building, but again, capital and class cannot be fully grasped outside other relations.

Form and function

After conceptualising the state as condensation of social relations, we can now go one step further and see how this approach might contribute in shaping the state’s material *form* and *function* – and how this varies over space and time. And in order to avoid any fallacy and define or reduce the state to either a formalist/institutional (what it looks like) or a functionalist (what it does) position, this needs to be grasped dialectically.

In terms of *form*, we must grasp structures like for example hierarchies that are produced within states, often in forms of bureaucracies claimed to be ‘impersonal’ and ‘neutral’ – aiming at treating everyone equal, that is in the liberal sense of ‘equal’. And in continuation of this, we can also investigate who are the people working within the bureaucratic parts of the state (Miliband, 1973), including planning departments – that they also tend to be educated, white-collar workers from the so-called middle classes (or above) also affects the outcome. In terms of the form of planning, it is also crucial to acknowledge the different scales within the state, where urban or municipal planning occupies just ‘one niche’ within the instrumentalities of state power – which again is neither a distinct entity separated from the state as a whole nor reducible to the national state (Billing and Stigendal, 1994; Cockburn, 1977; Fainstein, 2001; Harvey, 1985).

In terms of *function*, one often finds references to the state as organiser and guardian of stability (Harvey, 1985; Jessop, 2008; Poulantzas, 2000). As an organiser, we can locate several aspects, as for example the ironic activity of regulating so that the ‘free market’ will not collapse (Jessop, 1990: 96). According to Lefebvre (2009b), only the State has at its disposal the appropriate resources, techniques and ‘conceptual’ capacity to be capable of taking charge of the management of space ‘on a grand scale’ (p. 238). Classical examples can be found in huge-scale long-term investments that single capitalists cannot afford, as for example railways (Harvey, 1999). In terms of stability, the aim is to establish and maintain a ‘modicum of fixity, stability and predictability’ within the chaotic and changing capitalism (Brenner and Elden, 2009: 370; see also Lefebvre, 2009b). This might be conducted through financial means in terms of crisis, as well as

the general reproduction of existing power structures through various means like education and violence monopoly (see also Lefebvre, 1976; Poulantzas, 2000).

Jessop (1990) defines the state as a 'distinct ensemble of institutions and organizations whose socially accepted function is to define and enforce collectively binding decisions on the members of a society in the name of their common interest or general will' (p. 341). The concepts of common interest and general will can also be seen in light of hegemony, as the 'general will' is always an illusion because it must always be defined by someone (Jessop, 2008). What must also be acknowledged is the impact and power that these institutions and organisations might have. Some of these 'institutions' concerned with making decisions in the name of the 'general will' are concerned with land-use regulation. And from this, it is time to return to the field of planning.

Spatial planning and social relations

Planning, similar to the state in general, is often talked about as either a *thing* or *subject*. As a thing, planning is seen as being 'used' by for example a political party,⁶ ideology (e.g. claim within New Urbanism that contemporary planning is tool for modernity) or capital (e.g. in statements like 'in the end, money decides anyway'). As a *subject*, planning is seen as a freestanding power-unit in society (e.g. developers who claim that planning department consists of anti-business socialists, or arguably in CPT where autonomous planners are equipped with powers to change the world). This distinction should, however, be transcended, as planning should not be conceptualised as (any combination of) subject or thing. Planning should be conceptualised as condensation of social relations while acknowledging the specific form of planning organisation and function of land-use regulation. Relations between planning authorities and other forces and relations should be grasped dialectically – leaving out ideas of autonomy, and rather stressing their relational character while concurrently acknowledging the 'permanences' that surround us. In terms of providing the necessary legitimation, planning is often presented by the state as being in the 'general will' – and quite often in contrast to the interest of capital – but as we saw above, any claim of general will is illusionary. This 'general will' can have expressions as for example planning with the aim of 'social harmony', which again can have opposite conclusions: either 'social mix' or segregation.

How planning is organised also varies across *space* and *time*. In terms of spatial characteristics, we find for example differences in power, degree of pragmatism, legitimacy of state apparatus/planning department, knowledge and competence and political majority. Billing and Stigendal (1994) claim, just to take one example, that Swedish municipalities by international standards have a 'high degree of autonomy'. They follow Poulantzas' definition of the state as a 'material condensation of social forces' – where the development of the state not only 'depends on its institutional forms, but also how social forces take shape in and through the state' (p. 384). Billing and Stigendal (1994) argue that Swedish municipalities have become important places for condensation of relationships between social forces, precisely because of their strong self-government.

In terms of changes over time, we find for example waves of privatisations and so-called de-regulations during last decades that have obviously also affected spatial planning. This was, however, never a retreat by the state, but rather a transformation,

that is, a change in the form of the state (Tasan-Kok and Baeten, 2012; Picciotto, 2011). Within urban geography, a common way of referring to this is in the vocabulary of Harvey (1989), where there was a transformation in urban governance from 'local provision of services and facilities and benefits to urban populations' to 'new ways in which to foster and encourage local development and employment growth' (p. 3).

Five theses on spatial planning

Planning should be conceptualised as social relations. And as the term condensation has strong spatial connotation, we can also argue that planning is a place (cf. Mann, 2008). Based on the discussion presented above, this article can now articulate five theses on where to place spatial planning. The first two can also be seen as building blocks on which to place the last three. While some of these are not new or original in themselves, others are hopefully a bit more innovative. But as the context they are presented within is new to many, they can all hopefully be seen in a new light.

First, planning is a place constituted by conflicts (and not consensus) grounded in social relations. The mere fact that planning is constituted by conflict is already evident in many, if not most, and takes on planning (see, for example, Flyvbjerg, 1996; McGuirk, 2001). To place these conflicts in social relations, however, have implications: in economic terms, for example, the 'established order' and the 'social system' are best understood as parts of the capitalist mode of production, 'founded on capitalist principles of private property and market exchange', and which presupposes certain 'basic social relationships with respect to production, distribution, and consumption which themselves must be reproduced if the social order is to survive' (Harvey, 1985: 166). This 'social order', just as the 'general will' discussed above, is always based on someone's interest, and in contemporary society, this cannot be understood outside social relations like capitalism, patriarchy and racism.

Second, planning is never a neutral place. Despite that spatial planning has a semblance of neutrality, as part of the state apparatus, it is not a neutral, managerial activity, but rather a site in which socio-economic relations are (re)produced and political decisions are formed (cf. Davidoff 1965). More precisely, planning is a site where power is (re)produced and exercised within a world of conflicts. Therefore, planning cannot be conceptualised as merely mediators or negotiators between various interests. Planning itself must be conceptualised 'inside' and not 'outside' of conflicts.

Forester (1989) conducts precisely this fallacy when arguing the following:

In a world of conflicting interests – defined along lines of class, place, race, gender, organization, or individuals – how are planners to make their way? In a society structured by a capitalist economy and a nominally democratic political system, how are planners to respond to conflicting demands when private profit and public well-being clash? (p. 5)

I second Yiftachel (2001) who claims that Forester here sees power as an entity against which planners work. Forester's 'conflicting demands' are absolutely real enough, but should also be conceptualised within the planning office itself. The views that planners are someone who 'make their way' and mediate between different power-interests are

fairly common in planning theory. And this is surely how it often appears on the surface. (Even if we imagine an absolute separation between the planner and the world of conflicting interest, where did the planner learn her profession in the first place – if not in the highly ideological university system or somewhere else in the world of conflict?)

The illusion of neutrality is, however, important when planning is filling one of the general functions of the state, namely, reproducing some ‘established order’ (Harvey, 1985). But this is also exactly how hegemony is reproduced. In terms of economy, the reproduction of the capitalist city is the reproduction of capital dominating labour. According to Poulantzas (1975), the hegemonic class is the one that has the *double function* of representing both the general interest of the people/nation and of maintaining a specific dominance among the dominant classes or fractions (p. 141):

The dominant ideology, which is reproduced and inculcated by the State, also serves as the *internal cement* of the state apparatuses and their personnel. In this ideology, a neutral State appears as the representative of the general will and interest, and the arbiter among struggling classes: the state administration or juridical system stands above classes; the army is the pillar of the nation, the police the guarantor of republican order and civil liberties, and the state administration is the motive force of efficiency and general well-being. (Poulantzas 2000. pp. 155–156)

Due to its ‘neutral’ appearance, the planning office is perfectly equipped to *cement* (often literally) policies seemingly standing above conflicts.

Third, there is neither a bright side nor a dark side of planning. We cannot say that the activity of planning per se is ‘good’ or ‘bad’, or any combination of these, in itself. A claim that planners are ‘basically reformers who hope to improve the world’ (Beauregard, 2005: 203) is true only in all its banality; as the same can be said about most politicians, electricians or mathematicians. There are good reasons to believe that planners are nice people who want to improve the world – but no reasons to believe they are better than others. Planning must rather be conceptualised as a part of social relations in the society and analysed in accordance with these. And social relations are constituted by conflicts: while some planning schemes obviously are for the better for some people, the same plan may be for the worse for others. This can be grounded in (more accidental) spatial reasons (like getting a new high-rise in front of your living room window) or in deeper and more general structures (like the patriarchy, racism or domination of capital over labour). Rejecting the idea that planning is a priori something ‘good’ is not the same as rejecting normativity in planning as such. It is rather a critique of placing normativity outside social relations, hence a critique of normativity that is not founded on rigorous analysis on how planning relates to other parts of the world.

Fourth, the world changes planning and planning changes the world. It is fairly easy to see how planning depends on social relations at play, but this must be grasped dialectically – planning and the regulation of land use also changes social relations (cf. Harvey, 1973). As the Swedish geographer Gunnar Olsson once told his student Christian Abrahamson, spatial planning is a way of changing social relations without people understanding that that is what is done. This take on planning exclude any ahistorical reading of planning. The idea that the reproduction of social relations is ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ is merely an illusion (Lefebvre, 1976). Grasping planning as condensation of social relations

means that it must be investigated historically and as something that is open to change (cf. Picciotto, 2011). A statement like, ‘The goal of planning is not, however, the wholesale transformation of a society. Planners are not revolutionaries’ (Beauregard, 2005: 204) is only valid as a surface description of many planning offices in non-revolutionary times. But due to changes in social relations, revolutions *do* happen, and also planning and the organisation of land use play their parts. Hence, both planners and planning as discipline might become revolutionary – alternatively deeply reactionary. But most often, the quote from Beauregard makes sense, as the daily business is not revolutionary. But various historical examples, from Red-Vienna, Third Reich, post-war Sweden or even Thatcher’s England show the complexity at stake and the importance of reading planning historically, as well as the significance of spatial planning in social change.

Fifth, in terms of political strategy and social change, alliances should be made between those wanting similar changes in social relations. The crucial point is to change the social relations and how spatial planning can contribute to this. Normativity should be guided towards evaluating social relations, rather than making false aspirations that planning is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ in itself. This, I would argue, is a more fruitful way of conceptualising urban change. From a left perspective, one conclusion that can be drawn is that alliances should be made between planners and extra-planners with similar interests and aims, that is, between planners and for example, urban poor, grassroots movements, social movements (including Reclaim the City and Occupy etc.), labour unions, feminist movements, anti-racist movements, political parties, as well as critical intellectuals. Although I have mainly related planning to ‘land-use regulations’ in this article, the production of new cities and spaces also include cooperation between spatial planners concerned with land-use regulation and others concerned with social, economic and environmental planning.

A common claim is that planning should be left to the planners, and not to private developers, and this is easy to agree with. However, this does not mean that planners and the planning department have any policies a priori, which would be implemented if it were not strong real-estate developers pushing for their interests. The correct way of framing it would rather be that planning department can never be neutral, and should rather start with other interest as their prime influence that real-estate capital.

But in terms of economy and urban development, the power of real-estate capital is as we know hard to overestimate, and so are the differences in class power between for example real-estate developers and the urban poor in the *banlieue*. Both municipal planning and land-use regulations have roles to play in changing these conditions – but it goes without saying that planners cannot do so alone. Alliances between planning and non-planners are needed. The Planner Network UK (Pnuk, 2013) can serve as an interesting example, and so can various local ‘right to the city’ campaigns. Porter (2011) seems to have hit the nail on the head, when replying to why Pnuk have not included the development industry as part of their network:

The development industry is the most powerful lobby for change in planning. It is precisely this power that PNUK is seeking to challenge. We are not looking for consensus. We are looking for the proper locations of struggle, of the political, in planning. (p. 478)

Back to planning theory and forward to practice

In this article I have stressed the need for thorough investigations of what planning is all about, as well as the importance of comprehending relations between planning and other parts of the world. Hopefully, such an approach can contribute in bringing planning theory closer to planning reality, and thereby also reducing alienation among planning students – finding themselves educated in the goodness of their discipline and an often cruel reality – much dominated by vast capital influence, class differences and other power structures.

Inspired by Poulantzas, I claim that planning should be conceptualised as condensation of social relations. Through grasping this dialectically, my recommendation for practice is in the lines of establishing different kinds of alliances between people and groups with similar interests and aims. Such a conclusion has arguably similarities with *advocacy planning*, a tradition that was ‘established’ by Paul Davidoff as he coined the term in his famous article ‘advocacy and pluralism in planning’ in 1965. Davidoff here launches a critique of planning as a technical exercise and argues that planners should engage as ‘advocates’ for groups normally excluded from planning processes, especially urban poor, minority interests and so on. The advocating planner ‘would be responsible to his client and would seek to express his client’ as well as informing his clients of rights, options and consequences (Davidoff, 1965: 333). And rather than *one* supposedly neutral comprehensive plan (often benefitting elite groups), Davidoff (1965) envisioned a *plurality* of plans (see also Angotti, 2007; Guy, 2013; Heskin, 1980).

Such an approach has several meeting points with the five theses articulated above. But any direct incorporation of advocacy planning in contemporary setting, I argue, is problematic for different reasons. One thing is the limitations in the advocacy framework itself, but arguably of more importance is that both planning practices and the cities and places we plan have changed dramatically since 1965. Just to mention some examples: although developments are still local and always place-specific in one sense, we have also seen the rise of explicit (global) urban policies and strategies; we have seen massive privatisations and introduction of new public management; decades of communicative planning have revealed problems with ‘participation’ and using ‘communities’ as starting points; questions concerning ‘representations’ have developed; and not least, the environmental issue has become a prime concern. Put simply, the targets of ‘advocacy’ are no longer as obvious (see Angotti, 2007; Checkoway, 1994; Kennedy, 2007). Advocacy planning’s focus on ‘helping communities’ is also in danger of losing some of its radical potential, as all communities/everyone should have right to ‘advocacy’. In such a reading of advocacy, power disparities can easily be ignored and we end with a liberal appeal for pluralism (Angotti, 2007; Kennedy, 2007).

Despite the differences and the danger of liberal readings, some questions remain the same: if planning is supposed to be in the ‘public interest’, why are the urban poor, working classes, ethnic minorities, and so on, so often disfavoured?⁷ Davidoff’s call for making planning a tool for social change is still of highest relevance. It is worth noticing that the ‘genesis of advocacy planning was in structural conditions that produced inequality’ (Guy, 2013: 172), and this, I argue, is still the place from where to start. However, what

is needed today is something beyond ‘advocates’ in every situation where the poor (yet again) are disfavoured. Today we also see a cry for new visions, new plans, new places and new cities – which presupposes new political directions, new hegemonies and new power blocks.

I suggested above that a wise strategy could be to form alliances between planners and extra-planners with similar interests and aims. But what could this actually look like? One (defensive) answer would be that this must be figured out through actual practices and action (not least because the internal demand for loyalty within planning departments is different from place to place). But other (more offensive) answers are possible: some alliances could look like pure ‘help’ in various ways, including to launch alternative suggestions for plans (i.e. roughly advocacy planning), other could be organised around workshops, discussions and so on, which again could be transformed into programmes for what kind of places, cities and society that are wanted and needed. But as successful political struggle needs to be conducted at various places and fronts simultaneously – where planning plays one part – alliances are necessary not just with different groups concerned with particular development projects, but also with all kinds of groups desiring a different world: in this situation the role of planning is to (figure out how planning can) contribute to and facilitate larger changes in society.

Again, planning is a condensation of social relations. As social relations in contemporary societies are constituted by conflict (like racism, patriarchy and capital dominating labour and environment), so are planning. This is the point of departure. Then comes the struggle.

Notes

1. My own working experiences as urban planner comes from Norway, and as a researcher, I have mainly focused on the Nordic countries and England. I would nevertheless claim that the argument in this article could be extended to Western Europe and arguably everywhere with bourgeois democracy and capitalist economy.
2. Few major theoreticians (except dogmatic neoliberals) conceptualise planning as inherently ‘bad’ – arguably with the exception of Lefebvre (1976), who claims that planning is ‘manipulation of society by the state’.
3. To emphasise the development in Poulantzas’ thought, Jessop (1990) makes a distinction among early Poulantzas’, ‘regional’ and late ‘relational’ account of the state. According to Barrow (2002), Poulantzas rejected the structuralist label in 1976, although this ‘is still not widely acknowledged’. Poulantzas died in 1979.
4. Here Ollman’s (2003) comment on Althusser can perfectly be transferred to Poulantzas, as he ‘rejects the conclusion to which so much of his work points’ (p. 49).
5. Lefebvre (2009b) claims that this does not mean that the state institutions have ‘no autonomous existence’ (p. 220). The importance from this statement is that, of course, state institutions are sites where power relations are (re)produced and exercised. The actual terminology of autonomy, as argued above, I find problematic.
6. There is no space in this article to go explicitly into the role of representative democracy and political parties in the planning processes, but it is worth adding that the representative democracy operates as a very important way of legitimising planning as well being a site for conflict in itself.
7. Angotti (2007) points out that this is also applicable to the planning profession itself, with, for example, people of colour being (still) strongly underrepresented.

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